

# From one parallel society to another

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Occasional Paper  
January 2008

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## **Abstract**

Since 1999 the Albanian community in Kosovo has been facing a radical process of social transformation while experiencing for the first time the pluralisation of public life. The paper explores these dynamics overshadowed, both locally and internationally, by the issue of the country's political status, which has monopolised the public sphere.

Looking in particular at the consequences of the decade-long ethnic segregation during the 1990s, the essay analyses the development of civil society, media, political parties, as well as the phenomena of rapid urbanisation and the changes in family relations. The paper stresses how the Albanian community is hostage of unrealistic expectations for political, economic and social developments that should result from Kosovo's independence. In this context the democratisation process is hindered by the call for unity against external 'enemies' and in particular the Serbian minority and the foreign administration.

## **Introduction**

When the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia ended in June 1999, Kosovo experienced a few months of chaos, the absence of institutions, and poverty. During this period when Serbian troops were leaving the province, thousands of ethnic Albanian refugees returned to Kosovo and the majority of the Serbian community fled, fearing retaliation.

Gradually, a complex system of foreign administration was established according to UN Resolution 1244, approved by the Security Council at the end of the military campaign. In other words, Kosovo became the site of considerable international efforts at reconstruction and democratisation under the control of the UN mission (the UNMIK) and the NATO-led military operation (the KFOR).

The UN Resolution, product of a difficult compromise, did not lay down a long-term strategy for the future of Kosovo and left room for different interpretations by the different stakeholders. In particular, it left unresolved the issue of when and how the foreign administration would gradually transfer its responsibilities to locally-owned institutions.

As a result, many critical social transformations taking place in Kosovo have been overshadowed, both locally and internationally, by the long-running negotiations around the future status of the Province. It is important to grasp that, in the last few years, regardless of the country's undefined political status, Albanians in Kosovo have been facing a radical process of social transformation while experiencing for the first time the pluralisation of public life.

Focusing on this topic, our essay intentionally focuses on issues other than questions related to the inter-ethnic dimension of post-war Kosovo such as the problems experienced by the Serbian community and other minorities in the region who lived mainly in enclaves under the military protection of NATO forces.

## **Beyond a parallel society**

After the military defeat of Slobodan Milošević's regime, the challenges of overcoming the legacies of the communist regime and the war experience in Kosovo were complicated by the decade-long experience of ethnic segregation.

After the Province's autonomy was taken away in 1990, it was only a few years until Belgrade had expelled Kosovo-Albanians from workplaces and from public administration jobs and had restricted public use of the Albanian language, primarily in education.

As a response, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK)<sup>1</sup>, led by the President of the self-proclaimed Republic of Kosovo, Ibrahim Rugova, promoted the

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<sup>1</sup> The LDK rapidly became the dominant political organisation. Organising itself as a resistance movement rather than a political party, it attracted 700,000 members by spring 1991.

establishment of the so-called “parallel system”, that is to say, an underground schooling and health care system coordinated by a dense network of charitable organisations<sup>2</sup> that took responsibility for meeting the primary needs of the Albanian population.

These parallel structures benefited from the financial support of the Kosovo-Albanians who had emigrated to Western Europe and North America. A special solidarity fund was established thanks to their remittances to guarantee the sustainability of the parallel institutions.

Since the 1990s, confrontation had become the only context for ethnic relations in Kosovo and the parallel institutions, besides offering a survival strategy, transformed into a political project aimed at affirming the will of self-rule and an eventual sovereign future<sup>3</sup>. This context forced the Albanians to total commitment towards their ethnic community with the result of hampering, later on, the transformation from a politics of ethnic resistance into a politics of the reconstruction of a multi-ethnic society<sup>4</sup>.

In the new context which emerged after the military campaign, the financial resources flowing in from the Albanian Diaspora dried up. The parallel organization of life was no longer needed after the war and remittances returned to being private and mostly sent to families of the emigrants. Support from abroad was replaced by Western donors’ funds distributed by international relief agencies and countless numbers of international aid workers.

For most people, the task of building a new life and finding new opportunities

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2 The first non-state controlled organization was the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms (CDHRF) established in 1989. Additionally, one of the most established in the field, was the Mother Teresa Society ( M T S ). In 1998 it had over 7,000 volunteers, 1,700 doctors and 92 informal clinics around the Province

3 On the parallel system see Denisa Kostovicova, “*Parallel Worlds: Response of Kosovo Albanians to Loss of Autonomy in Serbia, 1989-1996*,” Keele European Research Centre, Southeast Europe Series, Research Paper 2, August 1996.

4 See Ana Devic, “Transnationalization of Civil Society in Kosovo: International and Local Limits of Peace and Multiculturalism”, in *Ethnopolitics*, Volume 5, Issue 3, September 2006, pages 257-273.

was mired by unexpected poverty and a context of state weakness . Many professionals that had worked in the parallel schools, university, and health care structures were reabsorbed either into the formal institutions under construction, emerging political parties, international agencies (acting as ministries), or into the internationally-funded NGOs established in the aftermath of the conflict. However, the majority of the population, and especially youth, remained unemployed.

In addition, although the memory of and the pride for past social mobilization left a strong mark on the Kosovo-Albanian society, the solidarity networks that had once boosted the parallel system lost much of their strength<sup>5</sup>.

## **Democratisation and control**

Vast foreign intervention was necessary to completely overhaul the judiciary, the police, local administrations, and the local economy, which, for a decade, had largely excluded Kosovo-Albanians. Immediately after the war, UNMIK acted as a full-fledged governing institution.

By May 2001, the UNMIK had established the Constitutional Framework for Provisional Self-Government (PISG) which set up the first kernel of local institutions. After the first parliamentary elections in November 2001, the National Assembly and the government, although significantly circumscribed by the extensive control of the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG), were gradually entrusted by UNMIK with specific responsibilities for internal affairs which included education, public services, economy, transportation, local administration, prisons, culture, etc.

At that time, ethnic Albanians had previously only experienced free elections one time, for local elections, in the year 2000. Clearly, the post-war political spectrum of the Albanian community took shape along the cleavages generated in the years before.

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5 Interview with Luan Shllaku, Executive Director of the Kosovo Foundation for Open Society, October 2007

In the liberalized political arena, the PDK (Democratic Party for Kosovo), led by Hashim Thaci, and the AAK (Alliance for the Future of Kosovo), led by Ramush Haradinaj, stood out. Both were symbols of the Kosovo Liberation Army and of the victorious armed fight in opposition to the 'non-violent resistance'. But until 2007, all rounds of elections, held both at local and national levels, saw the moderate LDK of Rugova winning clear victories.

Unsurprisingly, the wide powers delegated to the international mission collided with the growing expectations of self-rule by Kosovo-Albanians, who saw the foreign presence merely as a way-station to independence. Thus, all local political leaders were obligated to demonstrate to their electorate their commitment to conquering an ever-larger sphere of self-government.

In this context, the Albanian public opinion was eager to finally have access to free information but lacked a strong media. In examples of some of the effects of Milošević's rule on freedom of the press in Kosovo, freedom of printed media was severely limited, Albanian TV and radio programs were shut down, and journalists were fired from their positions.

Indeed, the new media market could have benefited from the considerable resources poured in by foreign donors, but the lack of experienced journalists constituted a serious problem. Furthermore, foreign funding provided opportunities in the industry that attracted people from many other fields.

The years saw the emergence of a substantial number of 'politically oriented' newspapers, tightly linked to specific political streams, such as Bota Sot, connected to Ibrahim Rugova, or Epoka e Re, connected with the PDK and former UCK fighters. Later, on 'business oriented' papers linked to companies or businessmen also appeared on the market, such as in the case of Lajm, associated with the economic empire of Bedxhet Pacolli, or Express, funded by the Internet service provider Ipko Net<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with BIRN journalist, Krenar Gashi, October 2007 and an interview with Berat Buxhala, in Francesco Martino, "Quarto Potere", *Osservatorio Balcani*, November 2007

Today, the press still remains fragile and is largely dependent on the government which is its strongest advertiser. Newspaper sales are also slow, reaching only around 30-35 thousand copies sold per day. Similarly, TV stations started operating under the 'umbrella' of the international community and now suffer from strong political interference.

In addition to supporting the media, the international mission played an important role in the support of local civil society development. Just like in any other aid-recipient country, Kosovo experienced the mushrooming of local NGOs that, up until 1998, numbered just 61 and by the beginning of 2004 had risen to the considerable number of 2,300<sup>7</sup>.

Once again, the past parallel system influenced the post-conflict situation by affecting the formation and attitudes of local civil society. During the 90s, the construction of a para-state to counter ethnic segregation entailed a blurring of the distinction between public and private spheres. Afterwards, it was difficult for civil society to redefine its role vis-à-vis government institutions and assume the role of watchdogs of political society<sup>8</sup>.

Moreover, foreign donors, overestimating the capacity of local NGOs, asked them to play a major role in ethnic reconciliation. This new request would require an impossible disentangling from their experience of ethnic confrontation and from the Kosovo-Albanian parallel society's culture of ethnic resistance<sup>9</sup>.

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<http://www.osservatoriobalcani.org/article/articleview/8479/1/45/>

7 Cf. UNDP *Human Development Report 2002* and UNMIK NGO Liaison Unit

8 Many are the legacies of the experience of ethnic segregation. For example, people who had acquired education abroad could more easily find employment in the UNMIK apparatus while years of parallel schooling had negative implications, both in terms of ideological mobilization and in terms of lack of appropriate trainings.

9 See Ana Devic, "Transnationalization of Civil Society in Kosovo: International and Local Limits of Peace and Multiculturalism", in *Ethnopolitics*, Volume 5, Issue 3, September 2006, pages 257-273; Mertus, Julie, "The Impact of Intervention on Local Human Rights Culture: a Kosovo Case Study", in *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1, no. 2, December 2001, pages 21-36.

Put under pressure to overcome such division, Albanian NGO representatives started accusing the UNMIK and Serbian government of worsening the situation with their tolerant, if not encouraging attitude, towards the newborn parallel Serbian structures. The unsuccessful integration of the Serbian community in the country was ascribed to Kosovo-Serbs' being strongly dependent on Belgrade.

Anyway, the peculiarity of Kosovo in this realm is that the counterpart of local civil society has not been local institutions but rather foreign administrators: instead of state-society relations, in Kosovo, one finds UNMIK-society relations. This is why, after 1999, civil society started defining its priorities and agenda vis-à-vis UNMIK.

In the beginning, some NGOs' representatives were included in the Transitional Council, the consulting body of UNMIK operating between 2000 and 2001. From 2002 onwards, with the establishment of the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government, NGOs were left out of the UNMIK institutions so as to push them to keep a distance from political society and to take over the role of advocacy organizations capable of communicating people's needs to their government.

However, this step is far from being achieved yet. Although a few local NGOs have emerged as grass-roots organizations (e.g. a few women's organizations or think-tanks), the majority of the population shows obvious distrust towards these civil society organizations and does not show interest in participating in initiatives supported by Western donors (petitions, boycotts, ordinary public rallies, and the like)<sup>10</sup>.

Beside the above-mentioned social dynamics connected to foreign democratization initiatives, there are other important aspects to mention in order

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<sup>10</sup> See Kipred, *A changing society, a changing civil society*, June 2005

to understand the radical transformation that took place in post-Milošević Kosovo-Albanian society.

First of all, one should acknowledge the experience of internal dislocation. If the population movement in Kosovo is generally associated with the experience of counter-ethnic cleansing afflicting minorities (Serbs as well as Roma), many ethnic Albanians also changed residence during the 2000s when they abandoned the countryside.

In Pristina alone, around 60,000 Serbs moved out of the city leaving behind thousands of flats that were then later occupied by the newcomers. The implications of such rapid urbanization are under-researched for the moment, but they are indeed considerable judging from the uneasiness regularly expressed by old urban dwellers towards recent arrivals from rural areas.

Emigration abroad used to be a fundamental source of economic sustenance for the region, but new visa regimes of Western countries are now restricting freedom of movement. As a consequence, according to the international think-tank ESI<sup>11</sup>, the already impoverished area with its considerable young population now lacks one of its main safety-nets.

The radical social, economic, and political changes that have taken place in the last few years have also had an impact within the realm of family relations. The extended family which provided such protection during the 1990s is under considerable strain today as moving to urban areas implies, among other things, the re-organization of family ties into smaller units.

Linked to the internal dislocation of the population is a perceived change in gender relations. The rise in the divorce rate is often associated with an increasing number of employed women in urban areas<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, female

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11 European Stability Initiatives, *Cutting the lifeline. Migration, Families and the future of Kosovo*, October 2006

[http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi\\_document\\_id\\_80.pdf](http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_80.pdf)

12 Interview with Valbona Mehmet, journalist, Koha Ditore, October 2007

university students who move from rural villages to Pristina to study are indeed more and more unwilling to return to the villages after obtaining their degrees. In the public sphere, all forms of individual emancipation have been associated with the introduction of foreign-life models that some claim to be incompatible with local habits and traditions.

A stronger gender balance in public life has been encouraged by the international community, which introduced positive discrimination in favor of women, reserving to them at least 30 percent of the seats in the National Assembly. But it is the presence of thousands of foreigners that has had the strongest cultural impact in Kosovo during this period of deep transformation.

## **The explosion of discontent**

Taking the international community by surprise, in March 2004 a violent outburst of discontent emerged that first targeted the Serbian minority and then the international community protecting it. When three Albanian children drowned in the Ibar River on 16 March, 2004, the local media speculated on possible Serbian responsibility for the tragedy. The following day, thousands of Kosovo Albanians gathered by the bridge dividing Mitrovica. Peacekeepers from the KFOR blocked the bridge, but gunmen on both sides opened fire and at least eight people were killed. On 18 March, the wave of unrest rippled through many other regions of Kosovo. The final death toll was 19 (11 Albanians and 8 Serbs). About 900 people were injured (including 61 peacekeepers and 55 police officers) and about 800 houses and 35 Serbian churches and monasteries were destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

Inter-ethnic relations in Kosovo deteriorated starkly after the 2004 riots, but the events also marked a turning point for relations between local institutions and the ruling international mission. For the first time, the UNMIK faced a violent

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<sup>13</sup> See the report by Amnesty International, (2004) *Kosovo/Kosova (Serbia and Montenegro): The March Violence -One year on*, [http://www.amnesty.org/en/alfresco\\_asset/a92e3290-a315-11dc-8d74-6f45f39984e5/eur700062005en.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org/en/alfresco_asset/a92e3290-a315-11dc-8d74-6f45f39984e5/eur700062005en.pdf)

reaction to its presence in the region and thus changed its strategy by placing the issue of status at the top of its agenda and leaving aside all other priorities.

Since the 2004 riots, a decrease in public confidence in international institutions has become evident and continues to have problematic implications. People started to openly lament the corruption and nepotism not only of local politicians but especially of the UNMIK administrators denounced as equally untrustworthy. The NGO "Çohu"<sup>14</sup>, the first NGO to deal specifically with the issue of corruption in Kosovo, argued that a 'symbiosis' between the local political elite and the international community has been established due to the low level of professionalism of UNMIK's staff as well as the fact that many UNMIK officials on long assignments in Kosovo become easily enmeshed with local interests.

The problem of UNMIK and KFOR accountability and the relation between local and international institutions has become particularly sensitive over the years. The agencies of the interim administration have come under repeated criticism, not only from local institutions and public opinion, but also from many international analysts.

Among the latter, some argue that the legitimacy crisis faced by the international administration can be attributed to its failure to establish a system of checks and balances to its powers<sup>15</sup> or hand over responsibilities for local processes to local institutions.

An interesting example confirming this contention is found in the "Ombudsperson Institution," established in 2000 as a pillar of the democratisation process, with the mandate to oversee and foster transparency and accountability mechanisms of institutions, both national and international. In 2006 when a

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14 See Organization for Democracy, Anti-Corruption and Dignity - Çohu!, *The political axe of kosovo government in administration. Case study: kosovo tax administration*, Report, June 2007

[http://www.cohu.org/Raportet/Politics\\_and\\_Administration\\_Kosovo\\_COHU.pdf](http://www.cohu.org/Raportet/Politics_and_Administration_Kosovo_COHU.pdf)

15 See Human Rights Watch, *Better Late Than Never. Enhancing the Accountability of International Institutions in Kosovo*, Report, June 2007 <http://hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/kosovo0607/kosovo0607web.pdf>

Kosovo-Albanian was appointed as Ombudsperson, replacing his foreign predecessor, the person in the position of "Ombudsperson" lost the power to carry out investigations into UNMIK's and KFOR's actions. The public's impatience with lack of resolution of the status issue as well as with similar decisions, undeniably plays a part in widespread poor public perception of the international administration.

Similarly, one can examine the case of the media. The UNMIK attributed a substantial share of the responsibility for the March 2004 crisis to the local media, accusing it of fuelling hatred and intolerance. UNMIK then increased control over the media. In the eyes of many Albanians, this revealed both the UNMIK's paternalism and lack of responsibility.

In February 2007, during a public rally organized by the political movement Vetevendosje to protest the UNMIK's overpowering presence, international police force actions cost the lives of two Albanians demonstrators. On this occasion, the foreign administration was accused by local media of putting pressure on them to underplay the violent reaction of the international police, to give limited coverage to the arrest of the leader of Vetevendosje, Albin Kurti, and to cover up the lack of progress in the investigation into the international police forces' actions<sup>16</sup>.

## **The parallel discontent**

In reality, the growing popular distrust of the international mission was accompanied by growing distrust of the local political elite as well. However, in today's Kosovo, anything that is seen as endangering the final aim of sovereignty cannot be publicly discussed. While waiting for independence, numerous urgent political and economic matters have been confined to private conversations.<sup>17</sup> As a consequence, the current international stalemate has pushed Kosovo-Albanians

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16 Interview with Berat Buxhala, in Francesco Martino, 12.11.2007, "Quarto Potere", *Osservatorio Balcani*  
<http://www.osservatoriolbalcani.org/article/articleview/8479/1/45/>

to once again confine themselves in a parallel political space.

The steady decrease in electoral participation among Kosovo-Albanians is the clearest sign of their political disaffection.<sup>18</sup> The elections of November 2007 - that for the first time guaranteed a transition of power with the election of the PDK candidate Hashim Thaci - saw a turnout of only 42 percent, the lowest voter participation rate registered so far.

In addition, the last political consultation saw the emergence of a new party, the AKR (Aleanca Kosova e Re), founded by the controversial businessman Bedxhet Pacolli<sup>19</sup>. The party got 12 percent of the vote based on a party platform emphasizing economic development and jobs and with the support from urban youth. Beforehand, polls indicated a similar level of support for another party that claimed to represent the urban population and the intellectual elites, the Ora party, but this support did not materialize. The party won no seats in the newly-elected National Assembly<sup>20</sup>.

Poor economic conditions constitute Kosovo's most worrisome problem. With the unemployment rate reaching almost 70 percent, Kosovo needs to focus on its economic autonomy. Those Kosovo-Albanians who have family members working abroad still benefit from remittances but, as is often the case in areas with poor economic prospects, the remittances are not usually invested in income-generating activities but are usually instead used to construct new and bigger

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17 Interestingly, such observation that numerous issues cannot go public but remain confined to private conversations is made also by Anna di Lellio and Stephanie Schwandner Sievers in their discussion of the commemorations of the war in 1999. See: "The legendary Commander: the construction of an Albanian master-narrative in post-war Kosovo", *Nation and Nationalism* 12 (3) 2006, pp.513-529

18 See: Kipred, *Voting Trends and Electoral Behavior in Kosovo*, n. 6 May 2006

[http://www.kipred.net/site/documents/Voting\\_Trends\\_and\\_Electoral\\_Behavior\\_in\\_Kosovo\\_2000\\_2004.pdf](http://www.kipred.net/site/documents/Voting_Trends_and_Electoral_Behavior_in_Kosovo_2000_2004.pdf)

19 See: Francesco Martino, 21.11.07, "Behxhet Pacolli: guardare anche a est", *Osservatorio Balcani*

<http://www.osservatoriobalcani.org/article/articleview/8572/1/45/>

20 See: Francesca Vanoni e Marjola Rukaj, 16.11.07, "Il Kosovo tra passato e presente", *Osservatorio Balcani*

<http://www.osservatoriobalcani.org/article/articleview/8548/1/45/>

houses<sup>21</sup>.

It is interesting to observe that, with the issue of independence monopolizing the public sphere, only a few local economists and businessmen stress the need for open debate on Kosovo's development strategies. These voices do not question the goal of Kosovo's independence but stress how foreign and local political elites keep society hostage to the status issue in order to distract it from the country's poor economic performances<sup>22</sup>.

As a matter of fact, the parallel political space contributes to fostering unrealistic expectations for economic and social developments expected to accompany Kosovo's independence. The parallel political space also allows the radical social changes of the recent past – and their implications – to be overlooked.

Further delays in resolving the issue of Kosovo's status will only worsen the situation because it hinders Kosovo's democratization process by legitimizing the need for unity against external 'enemies'. A decision about the country's status should free space for public discussions and allow the country's main economic and social issues to be addressed. Furthermore, the EU mission that will replace the UNMIK in Kosovo should aim not to recreate the conditions that relegate dissent to the underground but instead aim to positively integrate the public sphere.

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21 Interview with Mehmet Mustafa, director *If Riinvest*, October 2007

22 See for instance Francesco Martino, 13 November 2007, "Economia e status, sfatare un mito", *Osservatorio Balcani*

<http://www.osservatoriolbalcani.org/article/articleview/8495/1/45/>

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## Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso (OBC)

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The OBC website links information, research and international cooperation. Every month, over 100,000 readers visit the website: scholars and researchers; journalists; students; diplomats; local, regional and national government officials; policymakers; practitioners of development cooperation; business people; members of the diaspora from South-East Europe and the Caucasus; tourists and travellers; people generally interested in these areas.

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